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PERIODICAL PUBLICATIONS.**No. II.**

SKETCH OF THEIR EARLY HISTORY.

THE early History of Periodical Publications, though it contains many interesting particulars, did not till lately attract much attention, and is still but partially known.—Those to whom we are chiefly indebted for information on this subject, and who, in the language of the elegant author of the *Curiosities of Literature*, have exultingly taken down from their depositaries the Patriarchal Papers, covered with the dust of two centuries, are George Chalmers in his Life of Ruddiman the Grammarian, and Nichols in his Large Collection of Literary Anecdotes of the eighteenth century. Such Publications, it appears, arose gradually; and were produced rather by the influence of circumstances, than by any fixed or regular plan. It was long, indeed, before they acquired any definite forms; while the various changes through which they passed are curious in themselves, and were often characteristic of the periods at which they took place.

The earliest of these productions did not appear till a century after the introduction of the art of Printing. The first of them that have been noticed, were occupied with the public news of the times; but it was long before they approached the form of a modern Newspaper. Some of them were rather occasional Pamphlets on passing events: and others were Registers published annually or half-yearly.* These appeared first on the Continent. The earliest and the most remarkable of such precursors of Newspapers, was published in Venice, in 1536; called the *Gazetta*; most probably from *Gazet*, the name of a small coin, about the value of a penny, for which it was sold.† It was issued once a month by the government of Venice: but so jealous were they of a printed Newspaper, that it was distributed only in M.S., even so late as the commencement of the seventeenth century.

It has been ascertained, with feelings of exultation, that

* The famous *Mercurius Gallo-Belgicus*, was published at Cologne, 1598, and continued at intervals till 1630.

† Such is the most probable origin of the appellation that has since been so extensively applied. Other derivations are less satisfactory,—as from *Gazzerra*, a Magpie, to denote the chattering character of the work.

England had the honour of producing the earliest publication which can be regarded as a Newspaper; and that mankind are indebted for it to the wisdom of Queen Elizabeth, and the prudence of Burleigh. Such a publication might naturally be expected to arise from some great emergency, which rendered the rapid communication of intelligence necessary. We find, accordingly, that it appeared at the epoch of the Spanish Armada. Several Newspapers are still preserved, which were printed in 1588, while the Spanish fleet was in the English Channel. The earliest Numbers are lost: but it is probable that the publication commenced in April, when the Armada approached the shores of England; and continued till the alarm subsided, about the end of the year. It was what we would now call an *Extraordinary Gazette*; published occasionally, by the orders of Burleigh, to communicate information, or rouse the spirit of the people, during the alarms of that eventful period. It, accordingly, seizes with dexterity on topics calculated to rouse the patriotism, and even the prejudices of the nation; and employs that gracefulness of diction, which might be expected in a courtly publication. One of the Numbers, under the head of *News from Madrid*, mentions the intention of putting Elizabeth to death, and speaks of the instruments of torture that were on board the Spanish fleet;—circumstances evidently calculated to operate on the terrors of the English, their resentment against Spain, and their attachment to the Queen. The earliest Number preserved is the fiftieth, and contains news from Whitehall, of the 23d and 26th July, 1588. Under the latter date is the following notice:—

“ Yesterday, the Scots ambassador, being introduced by Sir Francis Walsingham, had a private audience of her Majesty, to whom he delivered a letter from King James, his master, containing the most cordial assurances of his resolution to adhere to his Majesty’s interests, and to those of the Protestant religion. And it may not here be improper to take notice of a wise and spirited saying of this young Prince to the Queen; viz. that all the favour he did expect from the Spaniards was the courtesy of Polypheme to Ulysses, *to be the last devoured.*”

“ I defy the Gazetteer of the present day,” says Chalmers, “ to give a more decorous account of the introduction of a foreign Minister.”—It is curious to find, at the end of some Numbers, advertisements of books, similar to those of modern times.

This interesting publication ceased with the emergency from which it sprung; and the long interval of tranquillity that followed was not favourable to the production of similar

works, which flourish best amid civil and political tempests. From the end of Elizabeth's reign, accordingly, till the rupture between Charles I. and the Parliament, in 1640, very few Newspapers appeared ; and these were but occasional publications, referring chiefly to Continental affairs. Their usual appellation was *Newes*—from different places, commonly the scenes of interesting events ; such as *Newes from Spain* in 1611—*Newes from Germany*, 1612—*Newes from Italy*, or from particular cities, such as *Gulick and Cleves*, 1615. They were commonly small 4tos, of 8 or 12 pages ; and were published at irregular intervals. But in 1621, an attempt was made to introduce a Weekly Paper, by Nathaniel Butter, who has been called the most active Newsmonger of the times. The first Paper of this kind that is preserved, is entitled the *Courant, or Weekly Newes from foreign parts* ; a half sheet in black letter 4to. But this was not continued. “The certaine Newes of the present Week,” August 23d, 1622, seems to have been the commencement of a more regular series. It was a small 4to, of 18 pages, with an Advertisement prefixed by Butter, intimating that “this manner of writing and printing, he doth purpose to continue weekly, by God's assistance, from the best and most certain intelligence.” How long he continued this weekly publication is uncertain ; as no regular series is preserved. In 1630, he converted his paper into half-yearly volumes, occupied with foreign intelligence, chiefly from Germany and Sweden, at that time the principal scenes of public events. They were compiled by William Watts of Caius College, Cambridge, distinguished by his various learning, and frequently engaged both in Historical and Antiquarian researches. Some other Weekly Papers were issued at that time by different publishers, but they seem to have attracted less notice, and are still more imperfectly preserved.

These facts are interesting, as they show that, previous to the civil wars, England possessed various publications which approximated to the form of regular Newspapers. But as that great event approached, they gradually multiplied ; and when hostilities commenced, their number increased to a degree which has scarcely been surpassed in later times. The two great parties that divided the country naturally appealed to public opinion, before they had recourse to the sword ; and eagerly embraced every method by which such an appeal could be made. Some of the methods employed are characteristic of the times.—The Pulpit presented itself as one of the readiest and most powerful instruments. During the progress of the Reformation, it had been roused from its long slumbers ; and had made the most fervent appeals to the

public, on the great questions then at issue : nor did it soon sink down to the calm, the grave, and the general tone, which it has commonly preserved in modern times. In the reign of Elizabeth, it still echoed the feelings of the different religious parties ; and when in the time of Charles I. religious questions blended themselves with politics, its tone became still more bold : till at last it was converted into the "Drum Ecclesiastic," for rousing the exasperated feelings of the nation. The same great questions were discussed in all companies, and in all assemblies. But the grand arena of such controversy was the Parliament : which at this eventful period first acquired a decided and regular influence, not only by its enactments, but by its discussions, as the guide and the expression of public opinion. When its debates thus became influential, they at the same time rose in eloquence and interest. The different speakers felt that they were addressing the public ; and they became ambitious "to wield at will the fierce Democracy." The public also were eager to know the details of the discussion ; for which purpose the Press was employed to give them to the world, even during their progress. This was a new application of the art of Printing ; which showed how readily it could accommodate itself to the transient topics of the day, and even approximate to the rapidity of public discussion.

At this time, accordingly, Parliamentary Debates began to be published, not only in large collections, but in regular Periodicals that were commonly issued once a week. These commenced in 1640, and were very numerous in 1641-42,—when Parliamentary proceedings acquired a dreadful intensity of interest, as the precursors of the storm of civil war, which was ready to burst forth. They were commonly called *Diurnal occurrences of Parliament*, which increased in number, and assumed various forms, during the subsequent eventful period. They were soon followed by other Papers, which embraced all the events of the day. The earliest of these were occasional publications, intended to convey intelligence from the principal scenes of action, at the commencement of the civil war; such as, Newes from Hull; Truths from York; True Newes, from our Navie now at sea. Others contained intelligence from a greater distance. Several were appropriated to Scottish affairs ; such as the Scotch Intelligencer, or the Weekly Newes from Scotland and the Court, August 1643 : The Scottish Mercury of the same year, and the Scotch Dove sent out and returning ; having a wooden cut representing the Dove with her sprig, and the motto underneath—

Our Dove tells Newes from the King's,—And of harmonious letters sings.

—A few confined themselves to occurrences in Wales; as the Welch Mercury, and Mercurius Cambro-Britannicus, 1643. A considerable number were also occupied with the affairs of Ireland, especially during the war there in 1641:—such as Warranted Tidings from Ireland,—and Ireland's True Diurnal, January 1642.—It is to be observed, however, that at this time neither Ireland nor Scotland had a Newspaper of its own: but the intelligence from these countries was forwarded in writing to London, where all the papers were printed.

It would be impracticable here to describe, or even enumerate the endless varieties of these publications, which swarmed over the country, during the fury of the civil war. They were the nurslings of the storm, rejoicing in the tempest, and partaking of its spirit. Their appearance, indeed, forms one of the most striking features in the terrific scene. The leaders of the different parties employed the press as the means of circulating information concerning every important occurrence, and of recommending their respective interests to public favour. The Papers which they issued were, accordingly, imbued with all the rancour of party spirit; and equalled in ribaldry and invective, the most furious and practised Journals of our own day. This vituperative spirit was common to them all; and appears even in their titles, their mottos, and devices; which thus present a striking picture of the times.

In surveying them, we are struck with the frequent similarity of their names, to which it would seem that a considerable degree of importance was attached. We learn, accordingly, that when a Paper on one side acquired popularity, a rival Publication in the opposite interest started under a similar designation; till it became necessary to distinguish them by titles the most singular and fantastical. The most common name was the well-known *Mercurius*: but it was modified into a hundred forms. The *Mercurius Melancholicus*, and *Pragmaticus*, were opposed by *Mercurius Anti-Melancholicus*, and *Anti-Pragmaticus*, in 1647. *Mercurius Morbus*, or the Sickly Mercury, was followed by *Mercurius Medicus*, or a Sovereign Salve for these Sick Times. We have *Mercurius Criticus*, *Academicus*, *Veridicus*, *Urbanicus*, and *Poeticus*; and also *Mercurius Vapulans*, the Whipt, or perhaps the Whipping Mercury; *Mercurius Mercuriorum Stultissimus*, and *Mercurius Insanus Insanissimus*, the most Stupid and Insane; *Mercurius Heraclitus*, or the Weeping Philosopher; and *Mercurius Democritus*, his Last Will and Testament. Other modifications of the name were still more fantastical. The Laughing Mercury, or true and perfect News from the

Antipodes, 1652; Mercurius Mastix, faithfully lashing all Scouts, Mercuries, Posts, and others; A Trance, or News from Hell, brought fresh to Town, by Mercurius Acheronticus, 1648; Mercurius Rhadamanthus, the Chief Judge of Hell, his Circuit through all the Courts of Law in England, 1653; the Hue and Cry after Mercurius Elencticus, Britannicus, Melancholicus, and Aulicus. Other titles were employed, equally expressive of the irritated state of feeling. The Parliament Kite, or the Tell-tale Bird; The Parliament's Vulture; and the Screech Owl, or Intelligence from several Parts, 1648; The Man in the Moon, discovering a World of Knavery under the Sunne; Martin Nonsense, his Collections, 1648: The Parliament Porter, or Door-Keeper of the House of Commons; Mercurius Volpone, or the Fox, for the better information of his Majesty's loyal subjects, prying into every Junto, proclaiming their designs, and reforming all intelligence.

The mottos of some are curious, and indicate the same feverish state of feeling. Two of them may be given as specimens: the one prefixed to *Mercurius Pragmaticus*, the other to *M. Elencticus*.

I.

When as we liv'd in Peace (God wot)
A King would not content us,
But we (forsooth) must hire the Scot
To-all-be Parliament us.

Then down went King and Bishops too,
On goes the holy wirke,
Betwixt them and the Brethren blew,
T' advance the Crowne and Kirke.

But when that these had reign'd a time,
Rob'd Kirke and Sold the Crowne,
A more Religious sort up climbe,
And crush the Jockies down.

But now we must have Peace againe,
Let none with feare be vext;
For, if without the Kinge these reigne,
Then heigh downe they goe next.

II.

To kill the King eight yeares agone
Was counted Highest Treason:
But now 'tis deemed just, and done
As consonant to reason.

The Temple was esteemed then
Sacred and Venerable:
Adorn'd with grave and godly Men,
But now 'tis made a Stable.

'Twas Crimall to violate
The wholesome Lawes o' th' Nation:
But (now we have a lawlesse State,)
'Tis done by Proclamation.

Both Prince and People liv'd in Peace;
The Land in Wealth abounded:
But now those Blessings fade and cease,
Thankes to the cursed Round-head.

In surveying these Publications, nothing is more surprising than their number. Within 20 years, from 1640 to 1660, upwards of 320 appeared; all distinct publications, of longer or shorter continuance, and all bearing on the public events of the day. But besides such Periodicals, more or less regular, this era produced a still greater number of Pamphlets on the same topics. A collection of these has been made by different hands; which became the property of his late Majesty, and was by him presented to the British Museum, where it forms an extensive addition to the Curiosities of Literature, and furnishes many sources of information to subsequent Historians. The magnificent collection consists of 30,000 Tracts, all written within the period mentioned, bound

in 2000 volumes. Several of these are in MS. and upwards of 100 were printed, but never published. These are chiefly on the side of the Royalists; and were written at a time when the opposite party had gained such an ascendancy, that it was dangerous or impracticable to publish them. They were, therefore, handed about privately in different places, among those to whom the King's friends had access: and so dangerous was the attempt to circulate them, that they were often kept in the collectors' warehouses, disguised as tables covered with canvas. So scarce too were many of the tracts even at their first publication, that the highest prices were sometimes given for a copy. It is said that Charles I. gave 10*l.* for the reading of one, which he could only find at the owner's house in St. Paul's Church-Yard.

We cannot survey such a multitude of Publications, without pausing to contemplate the *spirit of the age*, which they so strikingly exhibit, and which has often been treated with great injustice. It is frequently represented as merely the spirit of wild enthusiasm in religion and politics. But, though it was imbued with such a feeling, its chief elements consisted of the noblest principles of human nature; while the enthusiasm of which it partook, arose from the high excitement of such principles, by circumstances that roused every latent energy, and removed all ordinary restraints. It should be observed too, that its wildest extravagances did not appear till this excitement had continued long; and were rather confined to some of the more violent parties who gained the ascendancy, to the regret and disappointment of the more moderate majority. It did not in general break down the national virtues. No civil war, it has been observed with triumph, was ever carried on for so many years, with so little ferocity among the body of the people, and so few instances of particular violence or cruelty. Many examples occur of the most cordial friendship, and even intercourse, subsisting between individuals engaged in the opposite parties. It was a contest of opinion more than of passion: the great majority on both sides were conscientious in their views; and at every step endeavoured to persuade as well as to conquer. They appealed to the pen as well as the sword: and thus filled the country with the numerous Publications which we have been surveying.

One of the most remarkable peculiarities of the age, indicated by such Publications, was a spirit of *serious and deep reflexion*, which fed the flames of enthusiasm. This spirit was first roused at the era of the Reformation, when it was directed towards the most important objects. In the subsequent

period, it was confined to the questions agitated between the Church and the Puritans, of minor interest, but still connected with conscientious feelings: and was unfortunately exasperated by the arrogance and intolerance of the party in power. It was soon after directed to politics in connexion with religion: and was fed by the ingenious speculations and learned researches, of some of the greatest men that England ever produced. Such men as Coke, Selden, and Cotton, gave an intellectual cast to the age in which they lived, and to the cause which they supported. They supplied materials for reflexion not only to those in public life, but to all classes in the community, who were ready to enter into such discussions, as being connected with their most important interests. The spirit of inquiry thus cherished, continued during all the changes and excesses of the times. The most extravagant parties reasoned and disputed with astonishing dexterity. The wildest visionaries and fanatics supported their schemes, and inflamed their zeal, by subtle and ingenious speculations: and all appealed to the public through the medium of the press.

This spirit of reflexion was accompanied with the *deepest seriousness of disposition*, which attached importance to every subject of inquiry. The national character was never more marked by gravity and solemnity of feeling: and all its energies were turned to the investigation of truth. The connexion between Truth and Duty, too, was never more strongly felt; in consequence of which, whatever opinions were adopted, had an immediate influence on conduct. Had this sensibility to the connexion between Truth and Duty been shown only on great occasions, it would have commanded universal approbation. But as it was also roused by questions of minor importance, which admit of less certainty, and seem to be less connected with practice, it sometimes assumed an extravagant and ludicrous appearance. We should recollect, however, that even when misdirected, it was still one of the noblest principles of our nature, on which the strength of public and private virtue chiefly depends.

This reminds us of another peculiarity of that age, still more singular, which had perhaps a more extensive influence on practice,—a *taste for subtle speculations, and minute refined distinctions*. This taste was cherished in the time of Queen Elizabeth, by the questions in which the Puritans then engaged. It increased during the civil wars, when men ventured upon the boldest speculations, on subjects which at once interested the heart, and gave scope to ingenuity; without following any established principles or precedents. They were soon bewildered in abstractions and distinctions,

to which they most conscientiously attached the greatest importance, and which they followed out to the remotest consequences, not only in speculation but in practice. They thus presented the singular spectacle of enthusiasm, roused and sustained by Metaphysical subtleties; kindling at the nicest distinctions, and converting the most airy conceptions into solid realities. This appears in all the writings of the times. The very Poetry has been justly called Metaphysical. The Political speculations partook much of the spirit which produced Harrington's *Oceana*, and other Utopian schemes of Government. The religious writings also abound with the nicest distinctions and refinements in doctrine; combined with a fervour of devout feeling awakened by these, that expressed itself in the language of glowing, but irregular and unpolished eloquence.

The multitude of Publications which then abounded, gives a high idea of the number of readers which the country must have contained, and the general diffusion of knowledge. The higher and middle classes appear at that time to have been respectably educated: and many of them were possessed of extensive learning. Indeed, the sober habits of the age rendered literature valuable, as an agreeable occupation and amusement. Many peculiarities in the state of society, too, were favourable to the diffusion of knowledge. The gentry for the most part resided in the country; where, besides attending to their private affairs, and taking a part in all the public measures that occupied universal attention, they had leisure to engage in reading, and even in the cultivation of some of the fine arts, in which all the members of the family took an interest. The mass of the people in the country, were in various ways connected with the leading families, and had opportunities of receiving information on many of the topics of discussion. These facilities were increased by the common practice in genteel families, of retaining a clergyman, both as chaplain and tutor; who not only took charge of the education of the children, but directed the attention of the whole household to various topics connected with general knowledge, and the living discussions of the times. Religion, Politics, and Learning, were the common subjects of conversation at table, and in all the intercourse of life; in which the gentry engaged themselves, and to which they directed the attention not only of their families, but of their tenants and their neighbours. Thus a spirit of inquiry was generally diffused, even in the retirements of the country: while in towns it was still more extensively spread by the constant intercourse, and the common feeling of

interest in public events, among all classes of society. In this way, even those who could not read were made acquainted with the contents of the various Publications that swarmed around them: and the press acquired an influence over the public mind, not inferior to what it has possessed at any subsequent period.

As one great end of the Drama, according to Shakespeare, is "to show the age and body of the time its form and pressure," some additional views of this period may be given, by referring to a Comedy of Ben Jonson's, founded on some of the practices which we have been considering. It is entitled

The Staple of News—first acted in 1625.

The plot is confused and uninteresting. A foolish young man of large property, newly come of age, succeeds in his addresses to a young lady, having extensive possessions in South America. The different agents in the plot are connected with an Office, lately opened in London, for collecting and publishing News of all kinds; which is represented as a novel establishment, intended to gratify a passion for news then rapidly increasing. The design of the piece is to expose the extravagances to which this passion led; and the various tricks employed for gratifying it, by fabricating and circulating the most absurd accounts, which the credulous public were ready to swallow. The author begs the reader "to consider the news here vented to be none of his news, or any reasonable man's; but news made like the time's news, (a weekly cheat to draw money) and could not be fitter reprehended, than in raising this ridiculous office of the Staple, wherein the age may see her own folly."

The arrangements about the office show what were considered as the principal places for procuring or fabricating intelligence: the Court, St. Paul's Cathedral, the Exchange, and Westminster Hall.—The Office is thus described:

ACT I.—SCENE V.

Penny-boy, Cymbal, and Fitton.

C. This is the outer room, where my clerks sit,

And keep their sides, the register i'the midst;

The examiner, he sits private there, within;

And here I have my several rolls and files

Of news by the alphabet, and all put up Under their heads.

P. But those too subdivided?

C. Into authentical, and apocryphal.

F. Or, news of doubtful credit, as barbers' news.

C. And taylors' news, porters' and watermen's news.

F. Whereto, beside the Coranti, and Gazetti—

C. I have the news of the season.

F. As Vacation-news,

Term-news, and Christmas-news.

C. And news o' the faction.

F. As the Reformed-news; Protestant-news—

C. And Pontifical-news; of all which several,

The day-books, characters, precedents are kept.

Together with the names of special friends—

F. And men of correspondence i'the country—

C. Yes, of all ranks, and all religions.—